



Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

May 11, 2006

Mr. John Wheeler, Chairman
Board of Directors of the National High School
Mock Trial Championships
521 E Locust St
3rd Floor
Des Moines, Iowa 50309

Dear Mr. Wheeler:

We write to you to express our disappointment that your organization is holding the 2006 National High School Mock Trial Championships today through Sunday, May 11-14th, in Oklahoma City, OK without making accommodations for students who observe the Sabbath on Friday and/or Saturday. It is not our intent that the conference should be rescheduled or even restructured in a significant way. Rather, we are looking for a statement of understanding from you that demonstrates a willingness to allow students of all faiths to compete without violating the practices of their religion.

The National High School Mock Trial Championship has been, until last year, a prestigious event that requires a tremendous amount of preparation, skill, and dedication on behalf of those students who are competing. However, the competition's schedule, which consists of two rounds on Friday and two rounds on Saturday, followed by a championship round on Saturday, negatively affects an increasing number of students from various religious backgrounds in the United States, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims who observe the Sabbath on Friday or Saturday. Therefore, although this competition is open to participating students from all 50 states, plus the Virgin Islands and the Northern Mariana Islands, not all students are able to participate because of your refusal to make any modifications to the competition's schedule that would accommodate the observance of the Friday or Saturday Sabbath. Any such accommodations could be made on a case-by-case, or even on an individual basis, without having to disrupt the schedule for the remaining majority of participants.

This matter came to our attention through the predicament of a team that represented New Jersey at the May 2005 championship, the Torah Academy of Teaneck. The Torah Academy is a yeshiva, an orthodox Jewish high school, the students of which cannot participate in any competition on the Saturday Sabbath. Last year, satisfactory accommodations were made to allow Torah Academy to compete without violating the religious practices of the students. The matches involving Torah Academy were scheduled in such a manner that all participants were able to compete in the championships without inconveniencing any of the student groups or disrupting the competition as a whole. However, several months after the successful completion of this competition, the Board of Directors voted on October 15, 2005 to refuse any future accommodations for students who observe a Friday or Saturday Sabbath.

This is unacceptable and violates the civil rights of these dedicated students who shouldn't have to choose between their faith and participating in this competition. We believe that students who have otherwise met all of the criteria to participate in the qualifying competitions leading to the National High School Mock Trial Championship should be able to compete regardless of their religious affiliation.


For this reason, we are all cosponsors of H.Res.600, which calls on you to accommodate the religious beliefs of all students participating in the competition. This legislation also urges the Board of Directors of the NHSMT Championships to make minor adjustments, such as those made in 2005, to allow qualifying students of all faiths to compete fully in this national championship without betraying their religious beliefs. Enclosed please find a copy of this resolution for your information.

It is our hope that the Board will revisit its decision to refuse any future accommodations for students who observe the Sabbath on Friday and/or Saturday and instead, make all allowances in this and future competitions that enables all eligible students to participate, regardless of their religion.

Sincerely,


STEVEN R. ROTHMAN
Member of Congress

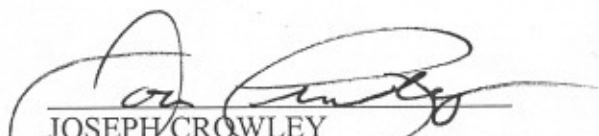
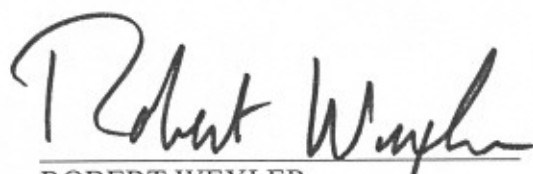



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Member of Congress


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CC: The Honorable George H. Carley, Board Member
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Mr. Dewain D. Fox, Board Member
Ms. D. Renee Hildebrant, Board Member
Mr. Pete Jones, Board Member
Ms. Jane Meyer, Board Member
Mr. Stephen Miller, Board Member
Mr. Robert Noel, Board Member

Page 4

May 11, 2006

Ms. Dee Runaas, Board Member

Mr. Michael White, Board Member

Ms. Judy Yarbrow, Board Member

Enclosure

109TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. RES. 600

Calling on the Board of Directors of the National High School Mock Trial Championship to accommodate students of all religious faiths.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

DECEMBER 14, 2005

Mr. ROTHMAN (for himself and Mr. RAMSTAD) submitted the following resolution; which was referred to the Committee on Education and the Workforce

RESOLUTION

Calling on the Board of Directors of the National High School Mock Trial Championship to accommodate students of all religious faiths.

Whereas religious intolerance and discrimination continue to be the root causes of many of the conflicts around the world;

Whereas the United States of America was founded by those seeking to practice their religion freely, and the American justice system, including all legal professionals involved, should be working to uphold this principle;

Whereas the First Amendment to the Constitution states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances";

Whereas section 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution states, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty,

or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.”;

Whereas the National High School Mock Trial Championship has been, until this date, a prestigious event that requires a tremendous amount of preparation, skill, and dedication on behalf of those students who are competing, and is looked upon with distinction by institutions of higher learning;

Whereas the National High School Mock Trial Championship is a program based on constitutional law;

Whereas the sponsor of this year’s competition stated that, “The National High School Mock Trial Championship is a participatory program that engages students, legal professionals and the educational community to advance the understanding of the American justice system and the important role of lawyers. A well-educated public translates into a more engaged citizenry that is better equipped and more interested in fulfilling their civic responsibilities”;

Whereas the National High School Mock Trial Championship espouses the goals of heightening “appreciation of the principle of equal justice for all” and promoting the “exchange of ideas among students from throughout the United States”;

Whereas the usual National High School Mock Trial Championship schedule consists of two rounds on Friday and two rounds on Saturday, followed by a Championship round on Saturday;

Whereas the Torah Academy of Bergen County of Teaneck, New Jersey, won the 2005 New Jersey State Bar Foundation High School tournament, and was eligible to compete in the National High School Mock Trial Championship;

Whereas the members of the mock trial team from Torah Academy observe the Sabbath, in accordance with their practice of Orthodox Judaism, and would not have been able to participate in any National High School Mock Trial Championship competitions from sundown on Friday through sundown on Saturday without certain accommodations;

Whereas satisfactory accommodations were made to allow Torah Academy of Teaneck, New Jersey, to compete during the last National High School Mock Trial Championship held in Charlotte,

North Carolina, from May 5–7, 2005, without violating the religious practices of the students;

Whereas a review of the post-host report compiled after the 2005 Championship showed a majority of the comments supported the accommodations made for the Torah Academy students and the benefit of competing with the Torah Academy students;

Whereas one respondent replied, “the compromise demonstrated fairness, tolerance and problem-solving, all values that I try to encourage in my students”;

Whereas the Board of Directors of the National High School Mock Trial Championship voted on October 15, 2005, to refuse any future accommodations for students who observe Sabbath on Friday and/or Saturday;

Whereas students who have otherwise met all of the criteria to participate in the qualifying competitions leading to the National High School Mock Trial Championship should be able to compete regardless of their religious affiliation;

Whereas the Board of Trustees of the New Jersey State Bar Foundation unanimously voted at its October 27, 2005, meeting that New Jersey will not compete in the National High School Mock Trial Championship unless the National Board establishes a policy permitting accommodation for religious observance;

Whereas the decision of the Board of Directors of the National High School Mock Trial Championship to refuse any future accommodations for students who observe their Sabbath on Friday and/or Saturday adversely and wrongly impacts observant Jewish, Muslim, and Seventh-Day Adventist students;

Whereas the decision made by the Board of Directors of the National High School Mock Trial Championship is inconsistent with the spirit of freedom of religion or equal protection; and

Whereas all students should be allowed to both compete fully in the National High School Mock Trial Championship and uphold the practice of their religion: Now therefore, be it

Resolved, That the House of Representatives—

(1) calls on the Board of Directors of the National High School Mock Trial Championship to accommodate the religious beliefs of students participating in the competition; and

(2) urges the Board of Directors of the National High School Mock Trial Championship to restructure the rules of the competition to allow qualifying students of all faiths to compete fully in this national championship without betraying their religious beliefs.
